

# WITHOUT TIME

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## Within Time

Second Edition

DANIEL IGNATIUS

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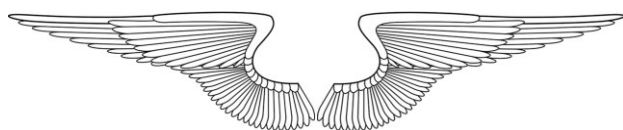
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## *Dedication*

*This book is dedicated to my mother, Gloria, who even at age 92, still provides inspiration and encouragement. I am grateful to her for showing me what unconditional love looks like, and for teaching me that kindness and humility are the greatest powers on earth.*



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# *Preface*

## **Amazing Journey**

There's an inherent understanding in the Christian walk that our best path is the one that God blazes for us. It's amazing, in fact, to think how much love is revealed in the fact that He creates a personal custom-made path for us that only we ourselves can walk with Him. Thinking of it that way, we are often ashamed of the ease with which we tend to abandon it and stubbornly wander off to test this pit or that quagmire. If you have walked this path, you know that no matter how often we wander, He has never failed to hold out a strong arm of rescue, even carrying us while our battered spirit is healing from the fall.

The truth is that while we have the ability – and heaven knows, the tendency – to leave the trail, we really have no other way except that path to get where we're destined to go; though we test the truth a thousand times, we always find that it's the walk closest to Christ that satisfies our soul's deepest desires. The path He designs is awe inspiring in its ability to shape and change us. At times it's an easy trail – doors of blessing just seem to open out of the blue and the pieces fall into place. Other times the opposite is true – there are no doors offering a way out of our troubles or they maddeningly close, one after another, and no way seems clear, leaving us struggling with frustrations, anxiety and pain.

When you think about it, it seems odd that we react that way. After all, it's the open doors that call us to reach most deeply into our storehouse of abilities and expend ourselves the hardest. They bring us endless amounts of work that can often consume us with effort and stretch our abilities beyond their limits. Closed doors, on the other hand, bring no work at all; there is no ability to reach inside ourselves to open them, try as we may. In fact, often they appear to us as no doors at all – leaving us staring at an empty expanse of wall without even a sign posted to guide our way.

Of course, our anxiety when we are at a wall is not due to a fear

of what will come, or even a fear that nothing will come, but rather to our fear of having no solution inside ourselves; having to wait for an answer from outside ourselves...

... having to trust our fate to God.





*“In the last days, God says,  
I will pour out my Spirit  
on every kind of people:  
Your sons will prophesy,  
also your daughters;  
Your young men will see visions,  
your old men will dream dreams<sup>i</sup>.”*

*~ Acts 2:17*



## CHAPTER One

## On Earth... as it is in Heaven

*Heaven and earth in midnight stillness heard the groans and sighs  
of the mysterious Being in whom both worlds were blended.*

*~ Charles H. Spurgeon*

The darkness surrounded me suddenly, freezing me with fear. I struggled to make sense of the unfamiliar scene as a cold blast of wind stole my breath away and I tried to remember -- where was I? How had I gotten here? The place was strange and unfamiliar in a way that was ominous and unsettling.

The shrill thundering of fifty thousand pounds of thrust drew my attention and I turned quickly to see an enormous jet approaching; so close that it looked as if I could reach up and touch it as it blasted past me just overhead. Its roar was deafening.

That's when I noticed him -- an indomitable figure, larger than any man. He was an otherworldly looking stranger.

He stood watching the huge planes as they neared like enormous behemoths, one after another; growing from pin pricks of light into brazen beams that flooded the sky and pressed the air beneath them as they hung above him in their solemn approach. The colorless night that surrounded us stretched in all directions, its darkness was thick, like coal dust, masking the wider scene's blush.

My attention was drawn to a wide highway below us with an endless flow of heavy traffic that moved like a screaming rain of piercing light beams in an odd and chaotic concert. Its river of lights swiftly passed beneath us -- their departure appearing like a swarm of embers, hot red; their tails flashed and glowed in disordered unison in a mix of scattered red and amber orbs. The bounded arteries on which they passed glowed within their borders and huge signs, like eerie looking green tetragons, flashed their messages as they were illuminated by the brilliant onslaught.

I looked again at the stranger, watching him anxiously. From his enormous broad shoulders a thick cape undulated in an unnaturally stiff wind; his resolute face was fixed purposefully and revealed an inexpressible mix of emotion, his hair and bristling beard were stately white. His eyes seemed to pierce into the darkness before him; they held a look of deep knowledge -- more than understanding, they seemed to reflect the experience of long history. His bearing seemed to emanate kindness -- righteousness even -- but his brow was somber, lined with hard earned wisdom and discernment.

Turning, he spoke to an unnoticed companion who had suddenly appeared, no less dramatic in appearance -- the words that he spoke sounded thunderous:

*"I weary of this incessant battle,"* he bemoaned.

His stalwart companion approached with firm steps and grasped his shoulder;

*"Thou art strong of heart Ardent,"* he consoled, *"a lesser one would have fallen long ages ago in so fierce a conflict."*

*"Speak not such invention,"* the one called Ardent protested, *"were it not for the strength of the Almighty this ombudsman would have verily fallen at the first contest. Aye... His strength,"* he repeated gratefully.

*"Then His strength shall continue to sustain us... and to make us prevail,"* the unflinching companion asserted.

*"I must surely take hold of thy words,"* Ardent avowed, *"they are eternal truth. I wish only for the casualties to be less severe -- less lamentable."*

*"That, my brother, as thou knowest full well, is the purpose of our struggle."*

*"How is it?"* Ardent reasoned aloud, *"how has creation's hope -- these children of most glorious design -- become the agony of all the universe? This beautiful creature is become the terror of immortal dreams. All of our heavens cry for the calamity that is Earth!"*

*"Tis true..."* his partner resolved, *"the beguiler of these human hearts has taken a grievous toll. Still our pursuit is not yet attained, we have labors still to work -- remember the esteemed*

ones."

A look mixed of hope and solace emboldened Ardent's face.

"Aye," he said determinedly, *"the esteemed ones shall prevail... by His unfailing grace!"*

Suddenly the two of them turned, as if called by an inaudible command.

*"Quickly!"* -- The first called to his compatriot -- *"I will direct our brothers in their assault... be swift! Thy duty is to Sterling."*

A massive swell erupted beneath Ardent's huge cape, effortlessly forcing the thick fabric into the air behind him and revealing the concealed enormity of brilliant white cherub wings as they spread upward. With a single blast of his wings he was catapulted skyward.

Overhead the dark air had filled with a legion of their gallant companions.

*"To the fray with Godspeed!"* Ardent called to the others; his voice thundered so that it seemed as if the sound of it could be heard to echo from Earth's moon.

Moving with terrific speed, the glittering lights of dock cranes and huge metallic vessels blurred below them. The harbor, with its smell of thickened oil and foul decay, swelled in undulating black rolls as they traveled rapidly overhead, converging on the city's unseemly streets.

Ardent dove toward the chosen battleground, his drawn sword flashing with the fire of holy fury. The brisk rush of a thousand sets of wings adjusting for descent crushed the air behind him. *"Away ye devils!"* His thunderous shout shook against the waiting enemy... *"or feel the bite of holy fire!"*

*"These be our's..."* came the frightening reply from below, it shrieked in cruel foment like the cry of a hundred prehistoric predators in a profane unison.. *"Yer battle is lost already!"* they protested.

*"Ye hold vainly to thy lies -- Then ye have chosen fire!"* Ardent cried, his sword in full flame spelling the signal for the charge.

The air overhead had filled with the clash of an immense struggle.

Below them the huddled forms of four young mortals could be vaguely seen among the shadows; their eyes blind to the fierceness erupting around them. Their struggle was against the cold night -- and the unsettling words of an unassuming messenger before them.

A boy, appearing aged beyond his years, pinched a fresh smoke between his lips and struck a match. The small flame lit his face momentarily in the darkened doorway, revealing eyes bloodshot and heavy with the night's imbibing, he stared ruthlessly at the audacious evangelist who was speaking to him. The discarded match sank to the ground like a dying star, illuminating a dozen spent cigarette butts strewn around his feet.

The lone preacher gestured emphatically, obviously making an impassioned point to the three boys. They leered at him with a mixture of contempt and fear. His words seemed to bother them immensely, and not them alone -- the beasts that were invisible to them clamored around the shivering boys, reacting angrily to the preacher's words as well.

He seemed to be quoting something... words that felt familiar. All those around him appeared to understand perfectly, yet the words were oddly masked. Their utterance carried great force; they struck against the hellish throng with a perceptible burst of thuds, like arrows hitting a thousand targets.

In an unearthly response that was unheard by the deafened human ears, a wounded shriek rent the night as these words cut through the surrounding devilish hoard. Breathing murderous cursing, they leapt toward the source of their agony -- rushing toward the defenseless envoy. Ardent's enormous wings formed a shield around the frail human figure just as the group of hideous devils attacked in a furious swarm; his powerful wings flung open, brushing them aside. With a mighty slice of his sword, Ardent drove the legion backward with fiery wounds. They hissed and railed against him, drawing the attention of unnumbered devilish kinsman battling in the air above.

Sensing a pulse of spiritual strength, perhaps from Ardent's invisible touch, the emboldened messenger's eyes flashed brightly as he continued, his words growing in intensity and impact. Impassioned gestures articulated his unbridled conviction and there was an emphatic expression on his face, conveying the supernatural

power of his message. As he spoke a sustained battery of spiritual artillery emanated from his lips toward the gathering hoards above him, this time appearing like a fiery rain of glowing pulses, flashing in waves of brilliant light. They pierced the ugly beasts and sent them tumbling backward.

Reeling from the power of this assault, the smitten beasts clamored back to their prey. The grasp of their hellish talons dug deeply into the listening gang members; each quote striking in the angry beasts a greater fury. The gang's leader bent lower as if feeling the darkness that crushed his soul -- "shut up!" he shouted. The other boys lurched forward as well, suddenly animated with a dark passion all too familiar. The half-smoked cigarette flung toward the unwelcome evangelist, striking him in the chest. "Shut up or I'll kill ya!"

The preacher continued; an unnatural boldness filled his words, which flowed with far more than intellectual argument; they seemed to pour from his soul with an inescapable ring of truth.

The leader grabbed the preacher's shirt and pulled hard; his own body was shaking violently with an overwhelming mix of fear and seething anger; it was a fear of the piercing guilt that seemed to stab at his long dead conscience, anger welled at this inexplicable fear gripping his entire being.

Another quote from the evangelist ripped through the hellish scene with the greatest intensity yet seen. The beasts were flung backward as if stricken with the blow of an enormous concussion, sent tumbling through the air. The boys were physically bent under the strain of their own pricked consciences, their faces contorted with angry rage.

Their closed human ears could not hear the hideous shriek that filled the air around them as a thousand of hell's host twisted in torment at the preacher's spirit-filled assault; their wounded cries sounding like the roar of an ancient monster of unworldly proportions.

The gang leader pressed his fists to his ears, his face filled with hatred. He shouted obscenities, cursing God and the unwelcome protagonist.

Suddenly, the whole host of battling fiends in the surrounding air seized upon the animus growing below, and descended in an

enraged press, bringing unrestrained their impulsive blood lust. The gang leader drew his blade -- the other boys flung themselves onto their tormentor, knocking him to the ground -- the long blade flashed in the dim light of a streetlamp, before sinking in cruel hate into its overpowered victim.

Ardent stood looking upward toward the silent and invisible commander who instructed him, forbidden until now to intervene. Now with a guiding wave of Ardent's hand the hoard of hellish creatures was quickly swept away by his angelic troops -- a police siren instantly erupted nearby. The boys jumped to their feet and ran for cover. Ardent looked down at the gasping human figure below him -- *"you'll be staying, brave lad; the Master has not done with thee here."*

Two patrolmen knelt beside him.

~

Suddenly, the hair at the back of my neck stood on end as I realized that Ardent had turned to look directly at me. I felt my mouth drop open in stunned silence as he bowed his head in a sort of deference. All at once I became aware of arms releasing me from a strong but gentle grasp that had been bearing me up. As my feet stood on the cold ground I turned quickly to see who had carried me.

*"I am called Chozeq,<sup>i1</sup>"* said the enormous angelic being bowing low beside me. I recognized him as the powerful personage who had been with Ardent on the tower a short while earlier.

Looking around in shocked amazement I struggled to make sense of the scene. It was entirely too real to be only a dream -- the street was cold under my feet, a stiff winter wind made me shiver and robbed me of breath as I tried to speak. Yet the policemen just steps away seemed oblivious to our presence. The extraordinary pageant I'd just witnessed could not have been real, at least, not in any worldly sense of reality I'd ever known.

I heard the first officer speaking into his radio: "The victim's

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<sup>i1</sup> Original Word Hebrew qzx, kho'-zek, Noun Masculine: 1. strength, power, powerful

name is Rodriguez -- Reverend Juan Rodriguez... looks like a single stab wound to the chest, tell EMS to step on it."

~

An intense flash of light instantly shattered the dark night, sending my already shocked senses reeling as it struck me. I raised my arms to shield my eyes and felt myself staggering backward. The light was now a steady flood; its heat warmed my chilled body, but the complete change it brought to my surroundings alarmed and frightened me. My eyes were momentarily blinded, but I could hear a completely new sea of sounds surrounding me; voices I recognized... I struggled to remember.

"Jimmy? Are you all right?" Kelly's voice cracked in alarm, I could feel her hand on my arm. "What's wrong? What's happening?"

Still staggering backward, something caught my feet, tripping me... I knew immediately from the loud clang as my head hit that I'd fallen into a hall locker, slamming its door. I sat against it rubbing my head. The hall was beginning to come into focus as my eyes adjusted to the bright sun coming through the school's expanse of windows.

"Jimmy, oh my gosh - are you alright?! What happened?" Kelly was kneeling beside me; a group was gathering around.

I stared at her trying to find any words to answer, not really wanting to, not sure if I knew. "I-I'm ok."

"It's like you blacked out or something. You gasped like a truck was hitting you. Are you sure you're all right?"

Mrs. Blackburn broke through the crowd and leaned over us. "What's going on here?"

"It's okay Mrs... I began..."

"He just blacked out..." Kelly interrupted.

Mrs. Blackburn studied my face and then noticed the impression my head had made in the locker door; "we'd better get you down to the nurse's office, do you think you can stand?"

"I'm really fine, I protested." As I stood a throbbing pain reminded me of the growing lump on the back of my head; I instinctively reached my hand to rub it.

"Let me see that," Mrs. B insisted. "You've got quite a bump on the head; you'd better get some ice on that." The mention of ice caused a chill to return to my chest and shoulders, I shuddered slightly.

The chill had only just begun to fade when we reached the Nurse's office. Mrs. Blackburn led me to a chair in the corner and went to speak privately with Nurse Snyder. From the smug look on her face, and the overheard mention of a "drug test," I could tell she had assumed the worst. I tried to appear grateful, as she brushed past us to leave; she frowned indignantly down at Kelly and me, not saying a word.

"You're Jim Moretti, right?" Nurse Snyder asked as she offered me an ice bag and wrote on her clipboard, "Sounds like you've had quite a fall." She was a decent person as far as school staff went; all the kids called her by her first name, Betty. Sometimes she tried a little too hard to be friends and fit in, but she meant well and seemed genuine. "What'd ya do, trip, or did someone push you?"

"Neither... at least I don't think... I guess I just lost my balance, that's all."

"Hmm..." she intoned, tapping her finger on her lips as if investigating a mystery. "Let me see that bump of yours." I felt another shiver run through me as she lifted the ice bag and probed the growing knot on the back of my head; she noticed my slight shudder. "Feeling cold? Your skin actually feels a little cool... maybe you'd better lie down for a few minutes, I want to take your temperature." She stopped at the thermostat on the wall and gave it a nudge... "Let's turn up the temp a little bit."

Kelly sat next to me with a worried look on her face; she and I have been friends as long as we could both remember; her mom and mine were best friends before we were born, we grew up next door neighbors and did everything together as kids. She's a great friend, the greatest; the kind you can share anything with... but not this. This was too weird to even talk to her about.

She leaned closer and looked me in the eye... "Are you going to be all right? I really have to get going to Chemistry class... there's a graded lab project today." She squeezed my hand, and then

looked down slightly surprised... "Wow, your hand really is cold."

"I've been holding the ice bag..." I reminded her.

"Oh... yeah... guess that's it." She smiled warmly and let go, waving goodbye.

"Bye..." I said, smiling back. Watching her go made me think about how much I was going to miss having her around when her family moves in a few weeks. As she turned and quickly made for the door I looked down at the hand she held and flexed the fingers, touching them against my neck to gauge their coolness – I knew that the ice bag had actually been in my other hand the whole time.

After Betty gave me an all-clear and two Aspirin, I spent the next two periods deep in thought, oblivious to the teachers' questions, which earned me a few extra homework assignments for the evening. I was struggling to make sense of the afternoon's events; could I be losing my mind – or maybe worse yet, what if it were true and I really had seen a Vision of some kind? But what could it mean?

By the time I reached home I was exhausted from thinking about it. All I knew for sure was that it had been the most realistic daydream I'd ever had. Every part of it was still so clear! Usually I can never remember dreams, but this seemed just as if I was really there! I even remembered the names, Ardent and 'Kozek,' ...I guessed at the spelling ...maybe their names could be a clue. My mind was jumping through the events like I was watching it on TV and someone else had the remote... The police said the victim's name was Reverend Rodriguez! I did an online search on the name – plenty of Rodriguez... but no mention of any of them being Reverends.

I finally gave up and headed for bed. The minute I closed my eyes the images came rushing back. This time they were definitely just dreams and memories, but they were still jarring in their clarity. In my mind's replay the hideous monsters seemed to be looking straight at me, they gave me chills. As tired as I was it was impossible to sleep. After tossing and turning for an hour I finally dropped out of bed to my knees and did what I should have done in the first place... I prayed... hard. But the harder I prayed the more chaotic my thoughts became. It was like my prayers were being batted away in a whirlwind of menacing distractions. I'd known times in the past when it seemed like the heavens were made of

brass, but this was like nothing I could remember. In desperation I finally threw myself to the floor and cried out... "Lord! Help me!"

The sudden change was so dramatic that it startled me, it was like a switch had been thrown and the cacophony was instantly quieted. In place of the swirling chaos was an intense calm... and a laser sharp focus that seemed to cut through the heavens. My thoughts were suddenly filled with a rapid pattern of words... recognized in their essence, but indecipherable by my conscious mind... like a forgotten language that remained understood by the deepest part of my soul. I struggled to recognize them, but they remained just beyond the grasp of remembrance, like long past childhood memories veiled in whispers. Yet they were stacked in an orderly sequence, like a great edifice of truth being built around me block by block, surrounding me like a fortress.

Deep in my hurting soul they seemed to draw an elaborate picture... of eternity, of God's omniscient preparations transcending time, His infallible planning; about a legacy that He is building... a great mystery... an effort into which He has poured His entire being. My mind couldn't comprehend or hope to contain the full stream of this exquisitely woven tome, as if the very heart of God was being poured out. It inferred an indescribable, unfathomable love for a broken humanity and an intense determination to leave a single legacy as the purpose of all creation. The words echoed and swirled around me before finally receding into a silence so intense that it gripped my very soul and focused my mind in stunned anticipation.

The words had been at once terrifying and soothing, like none I'd ever known – they made my body shake in fear, while at the same time bringing the most amazing thrill to my spirit. As it ended a sense of awe engulfed me; the image that had been drawn of God's intent in creation was right in front of me, yet it was so vast that it was beyond my ability to comprehend it. I began struggling for words to say, but was quickly stopped by words that pierced the silence, they paralyzed my spirit.

*"James Matthew..."*

When I heard my name the breath left my body, I was frozen in place. ..Who? I struggled to ask the question for which I already knew the answer...

*"I am the Word"*

With a huge gasp of breath I was suddenly aware of my surroundings, lying face down on my bedroom floor. As I collected my thoughts I felt overwhelmed with the implications of the message, which my soul seemed to grasp in spite of my mind's inability to comprehend it; I began to sob, until eventually falling off to sleep.

--<>--

## CHAPTER TWO

## Without Time

*Who of us does not desire to lift the veil that hides the future?*

Stepping out of the car into a driving rain, I landed ankle-deep in one of the city's famous potholes. "Bye Jimmy, I'll pick you up at 10," Mom said as the door closed. She sped off, preoccupied with a list of errands and the usual time crush. Can't wait till I get my license, I thought to myself as I shook the water from my drenched sneakers and pulled my jacket overhead, rushing to the door of Farro's Subs, my Uncle Mike's Sub Shop.

Uncle Mike glanced at the clock as I entered; "Nice 'a you to finally show up," he said with his usual dripping sarcasm.

"Sorry Uncle Mike," I apologized; "mom had a few stops to make. I'll work extra hard to make it up."

"Sure kid, could'a used the extra help 30 minutes ago when the dinner rush was in full swing." Just then the door burst open with what looked like a dozen college kids, soaked from the rain. They started ringing out their jackets and shaking their arms as if they'd just emerged from a swim. "Grab a uniform," uncle Mike commanded. I made my way behind the counter and donned one of the red bib aprons from the collection on the kitchen wall – 'the uniform' as Mike called it.

Two weeks had gone by since my 'vision-or-whatever,' I hadn't figured out what to call it, but I still hadn't been able to get it out of my mind. I'd spent every afternoon searching the web for anything I could find on angels, and especially the names Ardent and 'Kozek,' but so far had come up empty. One thing was sure, there was no Reverend Rodriguez listed in town. The more that time had passed, the easier it became to explain it away as just a bizarre daydream.

"You plannin ta eventually get ta work tonight?" Mike's verbal jab woke me from my preoccupation. "Here, handle the counter while I get the phone," he said, shaking his head in obvious annoyance.

Friday nights were by far the busiest of the week, and tonight we were shorthanded, since Jenny had bailed for a new job at the movie theater. Jeremy, the delivery guy, was already backed up with a half dozen orders and stood waiting impatiently for the last of them to be filled so he could make his next set of rounds. He stood in a puddle on the kitchen floor from his own drenched clothes.

Mike hung up the phone and started-in halving another dozen rolls, laying them out with mechanized precision in an orderly assembly line. I was busy writing order tickets from a new crowd of customers and working the register. Nothing like a rainy night to keep folks inside – the tables were already full. Jeremy, the delivery driver, grabbed the last package from Mike and made for the door; "make sure you get yourself back here pronto," Mike shouted after him.

I took advantage of a lull in new orders to give him a hand making subs. Another jingle of the door's bell signaled a new entrant and I turned instinctively to greet them; the face of the man who had just entered stopped me in my tracks – though I'd never met him before, I recognized him immediately with a sudden realization that hit me like a swift kick in the stomach. Before I knew it, the tray I was carrying had tipped, dumping the two large 'Number 1's' onto my feet and sending their contents sliding across the floor.

Several kids about my age followed the man inside. "*Pastor Juan!*" one of them called out, "your wife said to tell you..."

I couldn't hear the rest of the sentence; the room seemed to swim around me in slow motion – "*Pastor Juan...*" the name echoed in my head over and over. I could tell that Uncle Mike was yelling beside me and waving his arms. For what seemed like a long instant I stood frozen, unable to move my eyes, or any other muscle for that matter.

A loud noise behind me drew my attention, as I turned the room suddenly changed around me. I was surrounded by a flurry of activity, with people running everywhere. I recognized that some

were wearing what looked like medical garb. The room had completely changed – I was standing in an emergency room!

The scene brought memories flooding back of the night Dad and I were in our accident, the knot in my stomach tightened as I thought of our last moments together. It had been two years already... man, did I ever miss him!

Before I had much time to dwell on that thought, however, lobby doors blew open and a team of paramedics and policemen burst inside, wheeling a stretcher. They ran straight toward me, nearly knocking me over – I thought I recognized one of the officers... but couldn't place where I'd seen him before. As the stretcher passed in front of me I looked down at the man it was carrying – I caught my breath in shock, realizing instantly that it was him – it was Rev. Rodriguez! Glancing quickly back to the officers I recognized them now as the patrolmen who had responded that night, ...this night ...I struggled to make sense of it.

Juan was trying to speak... "BAIBI..," he gasped, "tell Baibina..."

"Don't try to speak," his attendant said, "save your strength."

"We found your address in your wallet," one of the officers said leaning over him, "a patrolman went to get your wife, she should be here soon."

The stretcher was moved briskly through a set of double doors into a nearby operating room; Juan was lifted onto the operating table, wincing in pain as they laid him down.

A lump was growing in my throat as I watched them work on his gasping body. The scene was moving fast, the emergency room surgeon was rapidly giving orders to a large cast of attendants who continued to flow into the room. They were quickly plugging him with intravenous lines and hooking him up to monitors; the room was a jumble of urgent voices beeps and buzzes. They covered his gasping mouth with a mask connected to plastic tubes and turned up the oxygen flow. White sheets quickly covered everything.

From where I was standing I couldn't see what they were doing, but it was obvious they were preparing to operate. The pace was frenetic. The monitors were beeping erratically – reporting a mix of jumbled heartbeats and unnatural-seeming pauses. The doctor in charge was barking instructions about CC's of this and milligrams

of that. Pastor Juan was growing calmer; the heaving of his chest slowing as he drifted into an anesthetized sleep.

I saw a blood covered scalpel; someone was mopping sweat from the surgeon's brow with a towel. A pile of reddened gauze was building higher in the attendants' stainless steel tray as they continued to fight the flow coming from Juan's chest. Two pint-sized bags of the crimson fluid hung attached to his intravenous lines, traveling in an urgent torrent to his lifeless looking arms. The reddened tubes stood out dramatically against the intense whiteness of the room.

It briefly crossed my mind that I usually passed out at the sight of blood, but didn't feel the slightest tinge now... weird to say the least. But then, what wasn't weird about this!

It was about to get much, much weirder!

I heard the EKG monitor sound a loud monotonic alarm and could see that his heartbeat had flat-lined. The attendants were scrambling over him frantically, pushing and prodding and injecting something. The doctor yelled "CLEAR!" and the room was suddenly filled with the concussion of a loud crackling shot from the Defibrillator. Juan's body jerked up off the table and fell back again... the monitor continued its steady wailing. Another "CLEAR!" ...again Juan was tossed violently... but still no response from his silent heart. As I watched the scene in a mix of horror and despair a strange glow began to appear on his arms and face – it grew brighter and brighter, until the surface of his skin seemed to lose focus, like a TV image when the colors get out of sync. The brightness seemed to be rising – emanating from him; it grew thicker and more distinct, taking on a recognizable form – his form. It rose quickly now, floating into the air like a mist that was suddenly free of its confinement, except this mist did not dissipate, it rose in concise unison – a perfect likeness formed of transparent light. I could see easily now that it bore a recognizable likeness to Juan, yet it didn't look anything like his physical body.

The glowing likeness seemed to be sleeping at first as it floated higher, then he slowly opened his eyes (if they could be called eyes) – he held an expression of utter wonder, not in the least burdened with confusion or fear, but rather an obvious sense of awe. He was intently gazing upward and seemed to be beholding something immensely wonderful to him, though the ceiling above us looked unchanged to me.

Suddenly I heard a familiar voice speak to him. It boomed in the small room, causing the hair on my neck and arms to stand straight. I recognized it instantly as Ardent's voice. Turning my head quickly I could see him standing behind me near the door; his countenance burned with compassion as he spoke, not out of sympathy for Juan's apparent death, but rather saddened with the news that he had been sent to deliver to him.

*"I have been sent to you, noble servant, with a difficult message. Though thy heart cries earnestly for the reward that awaits above... indeed, I can see that it aches most desperately for thy Master's meeting... still ye have work yet to complete here below. There is much that ye still must do in the fields of His harvest."*

Ardent's words thumped against my chest like raging waters as he spoke in a deep and powerful tone. Juan's image drew its attention from gazing above and looked at Ardent. He was drawn to the ground and appeared to be standing, then bent and bowed low at Ardent's feet.

*"Nay! Arise thou heir of the Most High God! Bow not before a servant such as I, but stand and listen, for the word I have for thee is most urgent."*

Juan didn't try to speak; he seemed awestruck by Ardent's imposing figure.

*"Ye have done well, faithful one. The field of harvest in which ye have labored is hard indeed, but rest assured that our Master's word will not return unto Him void. Even now is the seed of thy message gaining hold in the very enemies that have smitten thee."*

*"Ye have been faithful in small things, God will reward thee in large. Lo, He has chosen to anoint thee with a portion of faith that has been seldom known to the earth, ye shall be a powerful witness to this land in the closing days of your mortal time. Use thy gift well, for it is the final hope of countless souls. The hosts of darkness will fear thee and be powerless against thee, but be ever vigilant! Mindful be that no creature framed of the dust of this earth has yet resisted sin, save one -- He the darkness faced alone to annihilate death and all death's minions render impotent. Yet ye know that mankind in their weakness, though thus freed, continues to wear sin's enslavement by flesh's unfettered will. Be strong therefore! Watch carefully! For ye shall not taste death again before thy Lord's return!"*

With that, Ardent stretched forward his hand with palm facing upward and an index finger extended; on its tip could be seen a tiny seed, which sparkled in a glorious brightness as intense as the sun. It gave such light to the room that it obscured everything else; in spite of its intensity my eyes were not blinded by it, but rather were able to look on it fully unharmed, it was beautiful. Ardent touched the tiny fleck to Juan's forehead, where it quickly filled his entire being with its light as it consumed his form from head to toe, bursting forth from his fingertips in spectacular beams. He held his hands up, staring at them in amazement; a look of extraordinary peace and wonder filled his face.

Then, more suddenly than he had emerged – instantly – the room dimmed to its natural brightness as Juan was returned to the motionless body that lay behind him. For a second his human form glowed with the outline of the glorious likeness that had the same instant stood before us, and then his body quickly began to change from its cold white appearance to a warming lifelike hue. He jolted as he gasped a huge gulp of air; the monitors jumping back to life with the echo of his reinstated heartbeat.

The attendees who had already begun recording his time and cause of death turned in stunned disbelief at the miraculous recovery. A nurse raced to his side to feel the warmth of his newly ruddy skin and the pulse of his beating heart. The emergency room intern who had already removed his gloves quickly grabbed a new pair and returned to work on the untreated chest wound. I heard him muttering in disbelief as he witnessed what appeared to be already healed scar tissue on Juan's heart muscle, leaving nothing for him to do but close the surgical opening in his chest.

Juan drew a long breath and let out a sigh that seemed at once filled with joy and longing. To the utter amazement of everyone in the room, he began to sing in a quiet, nearly breathless voice; his eyes remained closed, by all indications he was still unconscious. But the words were clearly heard, everyone stood frozen in rapt attention as they drifted from his lips; they stared at his face, then at one another, some wiped tears from the corners of their eyes – the aura in the recently hectic emergency room was suddenly tranquil and other-worldly.

His words flowed in a slow, quiet whisper, trailing off after each line then beginning again; they danced along my spine, making me shiver. It was a song I'd never heard before:

To me remains nor place, nor time...  
 My country now in every clime...  
 I now am calm and free from care...  
 On any shore, since You are there...

While place I seek, or place I shun...  
 My soul finds happiness in none....  
 With You my God to guide my way...  
 'Tis equal joy to go or stay.<sup>iii2</sup>

I turned again to look behind me at Ardent, but to my dismay, he was gone. As I spun my head back around to where Juan was laying the room once again began to dissolve. In its place was a chaotic chorus of images, like a slide show on fast forward or a time machine at full speed. The sights and sounds frightened and confused me. As I spun looking for some frame of reference the floor dissolved away beneath my feet - it was impossible to tell for sure which way was up or down, right or left. I could feel myself being swept away, beginning to tumble backward; I suddenly found myself shouting: "help! Lord! Please, help me!"

Instantly a hand was in mine. My eyes followed the strong arm upward to Chozeq's steadfast face, suddenly steadied and secure, grounded in a bulwark of stability, even as the images of chaos continued around us. Somehow I knew we were standing in the midst of swirling time.

"Chozeq!" I said with a desperate sense of relief and trepidation at once; his presence engulfed me, obscuring for the moment all the chaos around us. "I have so many questions," I began... "is this a dream? It seems so real! I saw him! I saw Pastor Juan in the sub shop... but how... how could he be there and in the hospital at the same time... and I saw him get hurt last week, but he was just getting to the emergency room tonight." I stopped, aware once again of the swirling images surrounding us. "Where is this place? What's happening to me?"

"Place?" Choezq repeated thoughtfully, *"this is no 'place'... it is without time and place, the domain of angels, the avenue of heavenly messengers across ages of time and distances immeasurable in mortal dimension. Here we step readily from furthest star to its most distant cousin or from creation's opening light to Earth's final demise, indeed, even to the farthest boundary of infinite eternity."*

His words thrilled and frightened me; would I ever see my mother or friends again? I shuddered slightly, asking the question that consumed my conscious mind: "Am I... dead then?"

Choezq smiled reassuringly, *"Nay, lad, but it has been given to thee the great privilege of embarking in the flesh on a journey rarely traveled by other than angelic wing. A privilege it is indeed, and wonderful beyond mortal imagination, but beware, for a burden it also brings thee more heavy than any thou hast known. For in opening thine eyes to the unseen truth of our desperate struggle thou shalt be greatly troubled and buffeted in no small measure by our hideous enemies. In the spirit the redeemed shall once and for all be free of the curse's wretched shackles, but in the body still ye are weak and subject to its evil pull. Nary has a son of Adam in all the ages been found without sin's wounding effect, save for One. None in the flesh have prevailed against it – except for that One. It is His rule we earnestly obey and He it is whose victory has crushed our foe."*

"Why?" I stammered, now even more convinced of my own unworthiness... "w-why me?!"

*"All shall be revealed, yet now is not the ordained time. Only rest assured that thy faith shall indeed sustain thee. In Him even the weakest are strong, and the defenseless are unassailably safe; they could not be stronger if they were giants, nor more safe if they were in heaven. It is Faith that gives to men on earth the protection of the God of heaven. I assure thee Lad, more ye cannot need, and need not wish for."*<sup>iv3</sup>

"But..," I began again, "what can I, I mean how can I..." the words escaped my grasp as I struggled to comprehend the import of what was happening. "What's the purpose... w-what do I have to do? I-I'm not even sure what you... what He... wants me to do."

He spoke slowly and with great understanding in his voice. *"There is nothing hidden that shall not be revealed, but all is not*

*yet prepared in thine heart. Trust only. But heed this carefully! Ye must tell no one of this that thou hast seen nor yet shalt see! Only write what thou seest and most cautiously guard it; for it shall be for a revelation to this final age of man at the appointed time – in the time of His choosing."*

As he finished speaking this I suddenly felt that I was being swept backward again, away from him. I reached out to him, but was quickly falling further from his reach. His last words again struck me with a great strength of gravity: *See that thou tell no one what thou hast seen!*

With that I began to tumble, feeling certain that my feet were high above my head as I rolled uncontrollably downward through the swirling chaos. I closed my eyes and held my arms over my head, sure only that I would soon be crashing somewhere to earth with a frightful impact. The sounds swirling around me quickly began to subside until all grew silent; instead of falling I suddenly felt as though I was hanging in a state of suspended time and motion. I opened my eyes... at least I thought I did... all around me was total darkness. Then, in the smallest fraction of an instant, a shocking flash of light was upon me like a wave crashing over my head; it carried with it a cacophony of jumbled sounds – people shouting and rushing about. I recognized one of the voices, the one screaming my name in apparent anger and frustration – it was Uncle Mike. I felt myself falling backward once again, but this time my feet were sliding out from under me unable to gain footing as they slipped and kicked against the traction-less floor. The room began to come into focus just in time for me to see Uncle Mike's face contorted in a mixture of rage, confusion and then concern as it moved speedily higher and further away. The underside of the shop's counter whizzed past my eyes, as my head missed it by mere inches, and a split second later I hit the floor, bouncing against its thin linoleum and wood planks. My mind was dazed and spinning, but not from the fall.

I felt his hand on my arm, then another on my head. "You alright? What da heck's a madda wi you? Jimmy! Can ya hear me? Somebody call'a amulence!"

"No... i-it's OK," I struggled to get the words out shaking off the dizziness. "I-I'm OK Uncle Mike." As my eyes refocused I realized there were two people kneeling beside me, Uncle Mike on one side and on the other... Pastor Juan! My eyes must have grown

to twice their size; I suddenly lost my breath again, shuddering in a jolt of surprise.

Uncle Mike noticed my reaction, "Ya know dis guy?" He questioned me, "Ya look like ya seen a ghost."

"No!" I almost shouted, trying unsuccessfully to sound convincing. "N-no... we don't know each other – I-I just saw you coming in before I... I guess I fell." I tried not to make eye contact for fear that he'd somehow see the truth in my eyes.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Pastor Juan asked. "You really took a serious fall there."

"Yeah" – I struggled, looking down at the mess of cold cuts, lettuce and onions scattered at my feet – "guess I just slipped on the oil there," I said nodding in the direction of the spill.

He and Uncle Mike helped me up. Mike looked at me close – "you sure you're OK to work tonight?"

"I'm sure, I'm fine" – I reassured him.

"Good," he said with a sudden change in his voice from concerned uncle back to frazzled boss – "in that case get this mess cleaned up, somebody's gonna get killed slippin on this!" He headed to the back to get a bucket and mop.

"Hey, we can help you out with that!" Pastor Juan said, motioning to his group.

"No! It's OK, really!" I protested. Mike didn't like customers behind the counter, especially doing work; said it would get us in trouble with the board of health and some kind of *National Labor Relations Board*, or something like that, not to mention that he wasn't insured for that kind of... *risk* he called it.

Sure enough, as soon as a few of them bent down to help, Mike came running from the back yelling and motioning his disapproval: "Whoa! Hold up! Hold up! Whatcha doin? Ya can't be back here, board a health regulations! Customers ain't supposed ta be in my kitchen! I ain't insured in case one 'a you takes a flyin bounce like twinkle toes here." He threw the mop to me and used his apron to shoo the group out from behind the counter. As I worked on the floor he returned to the register to write a few more orders.

I couldn't help staring at Juan; he looked mostly the same as in my vision, but a little different somehow... then it struck me – the

man standing in the sub shop was younger, a lot younger. My skin was covered suddenly with a rash of Goosebumps; the chill running up my spine made me shudder. Mike was watching me from the corner of his eye and stopped what he was doing to come feel my forehead; "ya sure you're OK kid? You're in a cold sweat."

"Yeah, s...sure I'm Ok," I insisted, "just wet from the rain."

"Great.. all I need's for you ta get sick on me.. I'm awready shorthanded as it is. Maybe ya should go stand by de oven a while.. you're like a cold fish. Go answer d' phone, will ya?"

The night went by fast for a while after that. The phone orders were still coming in heavy and Uncle Mike struggled to keep up. I did my best to do double-duty and cover the register.

Glancing up from ringing the latest order at the register, I suddenly found myself looking into the eyes of a girl about my age. She didn't seem like just any girl... oh man... was she different! I was suddenly lost in her eyes, just staring, and she was staring back; I felt like our souls were... I don't know... *embracing*. After a long silent pause she pulled her eyes away and glanced down at the counter; she seemed to swallow kind of hard.

"I..I w..was wondering if..." she paused, once again catching my eyes, then continued slowly... "if I could get a coke?"

"Y..yeah s..sure," I said, trying to look less shaken. I fumbled with the fountain I'd used hundreds of times... ice missed the cup and hit the floor. "I'll get it," I said motioning apologetically to Uncle Mike. He just shook his head in disgust and kept working his assembly line.

When I returned to the counter with her soda she was still staring at me. I noticed all of her face for the first time, she was beautiful. The cup hit the edge of the counter, nearly spilling. I caught it with both hands and held it to the counter-top as if it was trying to fly away. "Sorry about that..." I fumbled.

"Thanks," she said looking at the cup with her hand paused in mid-air – I realized she was waiting for me to let go – I pulled my hands back embarrassedly and put them down to my sides. "You're Jim, right? I heard him call you that..." she nodded toward Uncle Mike.

"Yeah!" I exclaimed with slightly too much enthusiasm, "Jim, that's right... my friends call me Jim-my... guess that's kinda

obvious, huh?" I was crumbling in embarrassment at how stupid that sounded.

She smiled warmly and tilted her head slightly to one side... "my friends call me Anna." She leaned forward and put her elbows on the counter, crossing her arms in front of her; "looks like you've had a tough night." She obviously didn't know the half of it! Her question scared me and warmed me at the same time, I felt myself wanting to talk to her all night and run away out the door all in the same instant.

"Just a little busy – must be the rain..." I said, trying to sound matter of fact.

She continued... "Do you work here every weekend?"

"Yeah, usually... it's my uncle's place," I pointed over my shoulder with one thumb at Uncle Mike. Just then I felt his hand on my shoulder...

"That ice is makin a puddle, ya planning ta get to it one'a deez days?" Expecting to see him snarling at me, I stepped aside to face him, but instead he just winked and pushed on my arm with his fist.

I rang up Anna's soda and gave her the change; she raised a finger in front of her as if to say 'just a second'!... "I was sort of wondering if you'd like to come to our youth group sometime... Pastor Juan is really cool..."

I swallowed hard and glanced at him. "Yeah, sure..." I said, pulling my eyes back to Anna, "...when do you have it?"

"It's every Friday at 6:00; we just finished before coming here."

"Oh..." I said with genuine disappointment, "...I always work Fridays, I start at five."

"Oh, that's too bad!" She pouted when she said it, with an expression that broke my heart. "Do you go to Bailey High..." she continued... "we have a FCS meeting on Wednesday mornings?"

"FCS?" I said quizzically.

"Oh, sorry... it stands for Fellowship of Christian Students, we just meet to pray and have breakfast together."

"Yeah... I do go to Bailey, guess I never paid much attention to the clubs and stuff; I didn't know there was a Christian club there."

"It's not really a club," she corrected, "it's a nationwide thing that does stuff with kids in school... we meet across the street from the high school at Carmine's Diner; the owner.. Carmine... goes to our church."

"Wow, that sounds pretty cool... wh-what time do ya start?"

"At 7:00," ..she paused as if deciding what to say next... "you can come get me at my house if you want and we can walk together... I'm just a block away from there."

My heart was suddenly pounding; "s...sure, what's your address?" Someone behind her was calling her group together to leave, she turned to tell them she was coming, then shot me a smile over her shoulder...

"55 Jessica St., come around quarter of."

She ran to join her group and I could see her talking and motioning in my direction. Pastor Juan smiled and looked over at me, then came walking back to the counter. With each of his approaching steps my legs grew weaker, I could feel my heart skipping beats as I struggled to hide my nervousness... sure that he'd notice and become suspicious. What would I do if he asked me something I couldn't answer? Could I lie in order to obey Choezq's command? That didn't seem right. He was getting closer! As he reached a few steps away his hand stretched out... I saw my own arm reach to meet it in a handshake.

"Glad to hear you'll be joining us Jimmy," he said enthusiastically.

"Us"... the word echoed in my head... Anna didn't mention that he would be there too; I swallowed hard and tried to smile... "yeah, thanks," I said.

"See you Wed morning," he continued, then turned to rejoin his group.

All I could think of was what Choezq had said to me, it repeated in my mind over and over... *see that thou tell no one.*

